PANDEMIC PLANNING with GEMINI HOUSE

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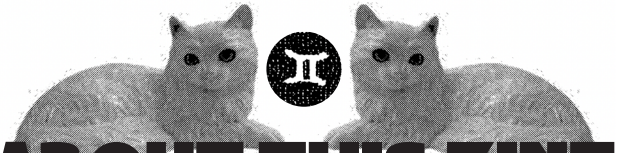


ABOUT THIS ZINE

Gemini House is made up of two friends, allison & Laetli, who started living together during the pandemic. We're both Geminis, we're both artists, and live in an apartment with our two cats in Minneapolis.

When Laetli contracted COVID from an asymptomatic friend in the fall of 2023, we were able to prevent further transmission despite sharing common spaces (including a bathroom). Some of this was luck—we wouldn't have known about the exposure in advance if the same friend hadn't asked to come over to our apartment a few days later. We asked them to test before entering our home, and the asymptomatic infection was discovered. From there, we were able to make a plan, and allison did not contract COVID.

Neither of us are medical professionals. We're not seeking to give anyone medical advice. However, we wanted to share some things we've learned about planning, mitigation and cohabitation during the pandemic in the spirit of community care.

LAYERING UP

For us, it's been helpful to think about layers of protection. Our approach to pandemic safety and planning involves thinking about our household and friend group as a 'system', a web of interrelated factors:

- Communication about COVID
- Masks with high filtration, such as an N95
- Nasal sprays and mouthwash
- Risk evaluation, i.e. looking at case data
- Air quality, ventilation and purification
- Testing
- Vaccination

We encountered the language of layering through **Clean Air Club**, a Chicago-based resource that focuses on COVID mitigation and advocacy for the arts and music community. Check out **linktr.ee/cleanairclub** and **@clean.air.club** on Instagram!

There's also a great resource and community initiative that's gotten started in the Twin Cities called **Share Clean Air MSP**. They share information, resources, lend out equipment, distribute masks and other awesome things. Find them at **linktr.ee/sharecleanairmsp** and on Instagram at **@share.clean.air.msp**!

VACCINATION

We've both kept up with our COVID vaccinations and boosters because we believe they're important as a foundational layer of protection. As of Fall 2024, there are updated vaccine for the current variants.

While there have been some changes to whether vaccinations are covered under insurance plans, it varies quite a bit. There are still community centers and other programs that offer free COVID vaccines around the U.S., and if you have health insurance, try giving them a call to find out whether they're covering vaccination at this time. Make sure to ask if there's a specific pharmacy or location you need to go to.

In Minneapolis, there are options for free vaccination as of October 2024! Visit the City of Minneapolis website at **minneapolismn.gov** and search for "vaccines". You'll find a webpage that has information about upcoming free vaccine clinic dates and locations.

COMMUNICATION

Prior to moving in together, we discussed our pandemic-related habits very openly, including masking and testing. Talking freely about COVID together and with others has helped us establish a mutual approach to care and safety.

Generally, before folks come over for the first time—or if we haven't hung out in awhile—we invite conversation by talking about our habits, what to expect at our apartment, and asking about needs. Some examples:

- *"What are your needs or comfort level around COVID?"*
- *"My roommate and I regularly mask in public places and have a few air purifiers around the apartment."*
- *"Could you test before coming over? We have extra tests if you need one."*
- *"I'm not comfortable eating indoors right now—could we find somewhere with a patio?"*

MASKING

Finding a mask that has good filtration and works for your face is a key tool! Research shows that cloth and surgical masks provide little protection, but respirators such as N95s and KF/KN94s are far more effective. You can find a mask fit guide at **thepeoplesmask.com**. There may also be a resource in your area—try searching online for "*mask bloc*" and your city or state. In the Twin Cities, **@maskbloc_msp** is a resource, as well as **@share.clean.air.msp**.

We mask in public spaces, such as grocery stores, airports, concert venues and public transit. Overall, our habits around masking are well-aligned, which helps our household risk assessment. Masking has helped us do more things we enjoy with less risk!

The Gemini House mask of choice is the *Blue Mask Black-3D KF94*. We find that these masks have a good seal, rarely cause issues with lens fog for our glasses, and have comfortable ear loops. We get them from **BeHealthy.com**, which usually offers coupons and bulk deals. If you use our referral link **https://i.refs.cc/vyTNk5Qi** you'll get $5 off your order.

REUSING MASKS

Masks such as N95s and KF/KN94s can be safely reused. According to the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**, a mask can be reused if it still fits securely, if the material looks clean, isn't thinning, and provides good airflow/filtration. Do not attempt to clean it with alcohol or other liquids—this will damage the mask. Coronavirus has an expected survival time of about 72 hours, so the CDC recommends placing a used mask in a paper bag for 5-7 days—any virus particles trapped in the mask should die off by then. Dispose of the mask if it gets dirty or doesn't fit well.

CASE DATA

Wastewater data is a helpful resource to look at COVID trends and learn whether cases are spiking. The **University of Minnesota** maintains a website that tracks COVID wastewater data, which you can find by searching online for "*UMN Wastewater Surveillance Study*", or by visiting **z.umn.edu/ww_dashboard**.

The **CDC** also maintains a national resource that can be found by searching at **covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker** or by searching "*cdc wastewater data*". These are both updated at least once weekly.

TESTING

After the national emergency for COVID-19 ended in the U.S. in May 2023, some health insurance plans and test sites ended free testing. If you have health insurance, call your provider and/or pharmacy to see if you're eligible to get free rapid tests. Some insurance providers require a prescription from a primary care doctor to get free tests.

There are some pharmacies and community facilities that offer free PCR/lab testing, and locations that distribute free rapid antigen tests. The **CDC** provides no-cost COVID-19 testing for uninsured people that are symptomatic or exposed—find locations near you at **cdc.gov/icatt**.

In late September 2024, the USPS began distributing four free rapid tests per household once again. These tests can be ordered online at **special.usps.com/testkits**.

At Gemini House, our testing habits are informed by case data, possible exposures and other observations. We test more in colder months, as cases generally trend upwards and ventilation is impacted (it's challenging to have open windows during January in Minnesota)!

TYPES OF TESTS

It's important to understand the difference between rapid antigen tests and lab-based tests, and what kind of information they provide.

Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests are performed in a laboratory and are able to detect tiny amounts of the virus but take more time to process—often spanning 12 hours to several days. These tests are considered to be very accurate.

Rapid antigen tests (RATs) generally process within 15 minutes and are available over-the-counter. Rapid tests are a handy tool, but be aware that they're fallible. A good rule of thumb: these tests are great at showing true positives, but they are not always reliable at showing true negatives. Look closely at your rapid tests—a faint positive line is a positive test! Holding a test up to a light source can help with seeing a faint line.

If you have symptoms, a known exposure, or have been in a crowded environment, using multiple rapid tests over several days or seeking out a laboratory/PCR test should provide more accurate information.

(Sources: Clean Air Club, UMass Chan Medical School)

VENTILATION

Ventilation, air purification and air changes per hour (ACH) can help reduce the concentration of airborne contaminants, including airborne viruses like COVID-19. Opening windows (weather, air quality and temperature permitting) is a great way to improve ventilation and ACH. Cleaning the air through filtration is also important, especially if open windows aren't an option.

When choosing an air purifier, consider the size of the space you are placing the filter in, and select a unit accordingly (manufacturers often give guidelines in square feet). The **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** recommends "a unit that has a high Clean Air Delivery Rate (CADR) for smoke (vs. pollen or dust), is designated a HEPA unit, or specifically indicates that it filters particles in the 0.1-1 um size range." We use a **Coway Airmega 200M** in the main shared area of our apartment, which can often be found online for about $100-$130.

You can also build an effective filtration tool yourself with a box fan, MERV-13 filters and duct tape! Find instructions about building a DIY Corsi-Rosenthal box here: **cleanaircrew.org/box-fan-filters**.

ANTIVIRALS

There are a handful of different antiviral drugs for COVID-19, but **Paxlovid** is the one we have had experience with, and seems to be most often discussed. Paxlovid (nirmatrelvir co-packaged with ritonavir) is an oral antiviral drug. If you choose to take Paxlovid, the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)** advises that it should be taken as soon as possible within 5 days of symptoms beginning.

Paxlovid is available by prescription, and access to it can vary. Prescriptions can be obtained from your health care provider or through the federal **Test to Treat** program. Learn more at **aspr.hhs.gov/testtotreat**.

Pfizer, the company that manufactures Paxlovid, also has a program called **Paxcess**, which is intended to help patients who have a prescription access the medication. Learn more at **paxlovid.iassist.com**.

OUR APPROACH

In 2023, three and a half years into the pandemic (and a year into living together), neither of us had contracted COVID. After Laetli had an asymptomatic exposure, COVID finally came to Gemini House—but we were able to navigate it without both of us getting sick. Here's what we did:

1. Knowing that cases were on the rise in our area, and because allison had recently had surgery, we had agreed that limiting visitors—and having them test prior to entry, and possibly even masking—was our 'best practice' for the time being.

2. The asymptomatic infection and exposure were discovered because we asked a friend to test before entering our unit, resulting in two positive tests. Laetli had hung out with this same pal about three days prior, and we would not have otherwise known about the exposure in time to act.

3. As soon as we learned about the possible exposure, we made a plan. There was no

way for us to know at that time whether our friend had been contagious earlier in the week, but we chose to take precautions. We began isolating immediately in our bedrooms, diligently masking in all common spaces, and testing with rapid tests.

4. We opened our windows and used a couple of box fans to help push the air out of the apartment in a bid to improve ventilation. We turned our large HEPA air purifier in the center of our apartment up as high as it would go. We don't have a window in our bathroom, but we placed a small HEPA air purifier in the bathroom, and turned the vent fan on. We also have small HEPA air purifiers in our bedrooms.

5. Laetli started having symptoms and testing positive approximately four days after exposure (about 36 hours after we began taking precautions). To conserve our test supply, Laetli stopped testing for a couple of days because we knew she was sick. allison tested twice daily for the first three days, and then once daily after that.

6. We isolated for about a week and obtained Paxlovid from Cue Health right away. Laetli rested a lot and took it very easy. From the time we found out Friday night to the next Friday morning, we isolated in different parts of the apartment. We continued to be extremely careful about masking with KF94s when we were out of our bedrooms. Laetli largely kept her bedroom door closed, and the cats out of her room.

7. Once Laetli began testing negative on day 6, we decided to continue masking in common spaces, somewhat isolating and being cautious for another five days. We did not eat or drink in the same room during this time. allison never had symptoms or tested positive.

8. Laetli recovered well with the oft-reported COVID "brain fog" being the lingering issue. Our main takeaway from this experience has been that our planning and clear communication served us well, and being diligent and proactive helped us navigate this period of illness.

RESOURCES

Clean Air Club (Chicago, IL)
linktr.ee/cleanairclub

Share Clean Air MSP
linktr.ee/cleanairclub

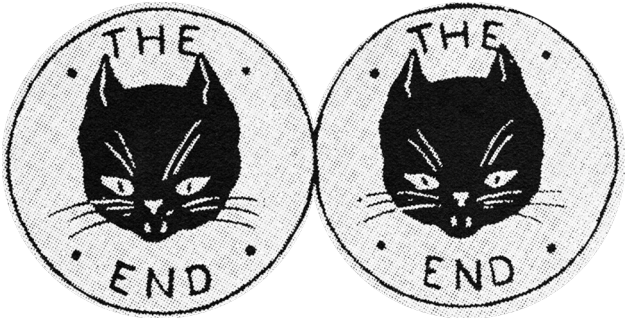
The People's CDC
peoplescdc.org

Hazel Newlevant's COVID Zine
newlevant.com/covidzine

CDC Covid Data Tracker
covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/

MN Wastewater Surveillance Study
wastewater.uspatial.umn.edu/sars-cov-2/

We've learned a lot about community care, breaking the chain of transmisison + pandemic safety by reading, researching and learning from the experiences of others—similarly, we hope that this zine provides something useful for you!



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